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ABSTRACT

If English teachers are going to clean up language and strive toward literacy, they need to stop using phrases that are meaningless, such as "prior knowledge," "dyslexia," "learning disabilities," and "at-risk." The persistent misuse of language moves the United States closer to becoming a remedial nation. What is needed is to teach students to think simply and clearly. Teachers need to teach reading and writing literacy within the framework of other literacies--civic literacy, computer literacy, economic literacy, ethical literacy, and scientific literacy. Many of the strategies to raise literacy levels are the same for inner- and outer-cities. Miami University of Ohio began a Teens for Literacy program in which teams of four or five youngsters (from minority and majority backgrounds with some leadership abilities) come up with ideas to improve literacy in their schools. Over three years, the teens have developed a Big Brother/Big Sister Reading program, produced videos promoting literacy, and arranged for the setting up of a billboard encouraging literacy. While the program can be started without money, the Miami University spends approximately $1,500 for each school. Developers of the program plan to add a school a year to the six schools already involved in the program. There are many ways to improve literacy in inner- and outer-cities: keeping language simple, challenging students, involving them in their education, including parents, customizing teaching to the cultural mosaic, using common and uncommon sense, and clarifying the role of principals. (RS)

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Literacies in Inner- and Outer-Cities

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A Paper Presented at the 83rd Annual Convention, National Council of Teachers of English, Pittsburgh, November 21, 1993

One of the many dangers to democracy, as George Orwell pointed out in his fiction and non-fiction, is the corruption of language. As English teachers, we are on the front lines fighting for literacy and, through literacy, democracy. But if we're going to clean up language and strive toward literacy, we need to begin at home.

In schools and cities throughout our land we use phrases that are meaningless. One such phrase that is rampant is *prior knowledge*. What exactly is the difference between prior knowledge and knowledge? What is the knowledge supposed to be prior to? A student either knows something or he doesn't. And in a class of 25 or 30 students, tapping into their knowledge--or prior knowledge, whatever that is--is not an easy thing to do, for every student knows different bits and pieces--some more, some less, some correct, some erroneous--about any topic. Can you imagine the convolutions required in our thinking if the topic happened to be prior knowledge? We would have to tap into our prior knowledge about our prior knowledge.

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Another bit of jargon we love to use--(and we really don't love to use it because if we did we would treat it with respect: we just use it and abuse it)--is *dyslexia*. Now I'm not saying that there is no such thing as dyslexia, a word that once referred to perceptual and neurological disorders affecting languge. The truth is that nearly every child with a reading or writing problem is an education casuality: he or she has been messed up by the school or home. Some children may miss a lot of school in the first grade and never learn what they should have learned there--like the sounds of letter combinations. Or some children get distracted if their parents split up and cannot attend to their lessons. These children can be helped by knowledgeable teachers inside the regular classroom. They don't need to pulled out and sent down the hall to a so-called special classroom. Every classroom is special.

Closely connected now to dyslexia is *learning disabilities*. Once upon a time when a child had a reading problem he was referred to as having a reading problem. Now he's referred to as having as being learning disabled. In a lead article, titled "Dyslexia," in *Scientific American* (March 1987), Frank Vellutino clearly shows that students said to have dyslexia can be helped academically. Anne McGill-Franzen, writing in the *Reading Research Quarterly* (Fall 1987), shows that students who once were called reading disabled are now called learning disabled. She points out that in one decade alone the number of students classified as learning disabled increased by 119 per cent--even though the academic problems and legal descriptions suggest that, for the most part, these are the same students. The only difference is the language used to describe them.

A consequence of this loose use of language to us and our democracy is that failure to read and write is now perceived as a physical disability

rather than an academic or socioeconomic disadvantage. By using the jargon in vogue we shift the source for academic problems away from the schools, away from the homes, even away from the free will of children, to some kind of mysterious flaw in their brains. What this shift in language means is that everyone gets off the hook: it is not the child's fault that he can't read or forgot his homework: he's dyslexic or learning disabled. It's not the school's fault that she can't write well, it's not the parents' fault, it's not the home's fault--it's nobody's fault because there is something the matter with the child's brain.

Suddenly, there are millions of students who have something the matter with their brains. Ironically, a few years ago, when the definition of learning disabilities moved from one standard deviation to two standard deviations away from the mean of a given test, thousands of learning disabled children were cured overnight--with the stroke of a pen.

Not so long ago CBS News announced that 25 million people cannot read because they have learning disabilities, and millions more citizens cannot read because they have dyslexia. The media also tell us that 90 per cent of the more than million men and women in prisons are illiterate. At the same time we are also informed that millions more throughout our land do not read or write English because they do not know it. In a poignant television film a college student is told that he reads at the fourth-grade level and there are 21 million others like him. Jonathan Kozol has said that 60 million adults are illiterate in the United States.

If my arithmetic is correct, it seems that there are only three people left in the United States who can read and write English.

I do not wish to minimize the problem. Vast numbers of people cannot read or write well enough to cope in our increasingly technological

world. But what are the practical consequences of tossing around figures and words so carelessly? What do we accomplish when we label kids *at-risk*? These are the same kids, incidentally, that we used to call *disadvantaged*. They may or may not be disadvantaged or deprived or, as we used to call them a long time ago, poor, but their vocabulary is probably growing. What do we accomplish when so-called new problems are discovered in school children like *hypoglycemia* and *Attention Deficit Disorder*? Chapters for ADD have formed all over the United States to fight this fast-spreading epidemic (and I use the word epidemic because ADD is often referred to as a disease) which, it is claimed, affects no less than 20 per cent of the population of North America. And now there are offshoots of ADD like ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

The greatest damage of all this nonsense, of course, is to our schoolchildren. By being labeled and mislabeled, they become boxed in and a certain amount of their free will is taken away. There is a tendency to focus on their weaknesses and errors rather than they strengths and successes. *The persistent misuse of language moves us closer to becoming a remedial nation.* To counteract this corruption, we need more people like fellow-panelists Marilyn Elzey and Jay Fry, respectively, former head of the English Department and the Football Coach at Talawanda High School, Oxford, Ohio. In Marilyn's classroom good literature abounds and students pick up paperbacks to read before, during, and after school. And if a student needs help, the youngster isn't called names: Marilyn arranges for reading and writing help from another student in the school or community. And never in my wildest imagination can I picture Jay Fry saying that one of his players dropped a football or can't throw a pass because he or she is learning disabled. We also need to

sustain the idealism of new teachers like our associate chair, Michelle Iserson, who now teaches in her first year of teaching in Derry, New Hampshire. We need to support the extraordinary courage of people like our chair, Carol Brown, language arts consultant, who do what they can through their positions in state education departments.

Going beyond the walls of our field is the rest of the world. Our reactor/recorder, Charlene Andolina Trovato, was executive director of a company in Pittsburgh that helped improve the reading and writing skills of executives of major corporations. Many of these top-notch executives used words and phrases in their spoken and written discourse such as *financial parameters* or *in the near future*. When asked to explain what those phrases meant, many of these individuals couldn't agree. One thing we might remember, incidentally, is that in some fields outside education good writing is not what we consider as good writing. Intentionally writing ambigiously rather than clearly is the standard for many legal documents. Ambiguity, a key element in poetry, is often a crucial ingredient in the prose of business.

The writing of Engfish, as Ken Macrorie (1988) calls it, is not confined to the field of education. Last year Martin Gregory (November 5, 1992) wrote: "There are two kinds of scientific writing: that which is intended to be read, and that which is intended merely to be cited. The latter tends to be infected by an overblown and pompous style. The disease is ubiquitous, but often undiagnosed, with the result that infection spreads to writing of the first type."

Examples of the misuse of language world-wide is documented in last month's issue of NCTE's *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*. In business, in Columbus, Ohio, a McDonald's employee wasn't fired; "his

bosses simply stopped scheduling him for work." In Canada, "the Eaton chain of retail stores has initiated a 'corporate reorganization' that will rid itself of 'unneeded support functions'. . . ." In government, "Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced 'the end of the Star Wars era.' [However,] . . .that doesn't mean the Star Wars program is dead; it just means the name has been changed from the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) to the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO). Even the budget will remain the same. . . ."

As George Orwell has observed in "Politics and the English Language," if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" (p.167) "Political language," he continues, . . . "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable." (p. 171) What we need to do is to teach our students to think simply and clearly. In classrooms throughout our nation we need to teach reading and writing literacy within the framework of other literacies--civic literacy, computer literacy, economic literacy, ethical literacy, scientific literacy, to name only a few. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis once observed, "Thinking, like the inanimate, takes the path of least resistance. To think hard and persistently is painful."

That is why it surprised me to read in one of the national reports on the high school that statement, with no explanation, that "clear writing leads to clear thinking." I wrote to Ernest Boyer, author of that particular report, for the research to back up that statement. He wrote back and said that it's not based on research; it's based on his observations. Well, it's my observation that it's the other way around: clear thinking leads to clear writing and that writing, if anything, tests thinking, reveals thinking, exposes thinking (as in exposition). You may recall Chaim

Potok's best-selling novel, *The Chosen* (1967) a father is bringing up his son in silence; the only time they talk to each other is when they are studying together. The father is a brilliant scholar and one day, in conversation with his son's best friend, says, "In your father's writings I looked at his soul, not his mind." (p. 267)

If we are serious about raising levels of literacies, we can use many of the same strategies in inner- and outer-cities. We must not hide behind words but treat them with respect. We can challenge students to learn and help them understand that learning can be a challenge--and that's part of the fun of learning. We can involve students in their learning through a tutoring project such as VITAL (Voluntary Individualized Tutorial Assistance in Literacy), which led to the nationwide Adopt-A-School Program. Or through another project we call Teens for Literacy. At Miami University we began Teens for Literacy a few years ago in three inner-city schools; we now have eight teams of teenagers in six inner-city schools in southwestern Ohio. With the cooperation of middle- or junior-high school principals, we simply form a team of four or five youngsters (from minority and majority backgrounds with some leadership abilities) and ask them to come up with ideas to improve literacy in their schools

Over the years the teens have developed a Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Program, selected and displayed posters in school corridors before, during, and after Right to Read Week. They have developed videos promoting literacy, and they have promoted books and authors in school newspapers and over the public address systems. They have read with little children, tutored their peers (including the multi-handicapped) before, during, and after school with books and computer software, helped other teachers, and read to senior citizens. Some have 1,000-Minute

Reading Clubs. One team designed and arranged for the setting up of a billboard encouraging literacy.

These activities have a ripple effect: they not only excite the youngsters who do them, they spark interest in their friends to the extent that many schools have waiting lists of students who wish to be part of Teens for Literacy. Here are a few excerpts of children describing their experiences:

> During the last six months or so I have been involved in helping kids from my school learn to read. At first it was a real eye opener to me that people my age could not read. I had heard about children in our country being illiterate but I never expected to see people my age in the same situation. This really hit home.
>
> I hope my work in the program has really made an impact on my particular student in reading. I think this program helped me also in realizing just how important it is to learn how to read. I am truly thankful to God for blessing me with the ability to read. I hope the student I have worked with will bloom into a good reader so that the work we had put forth will have paid off--Brad.

> When I first started tutoring I thought it would be something real easy to do. I was wrong and I took it as a challenge to make it easy. The young man I tutor doesn't like or want to read at all. Since he likes sports, I would read a sports article to myself and say to him, "Wow! Look at this article!" And

he'd want to read it but I told him he had to read it out loud. . . . . Now we're best friends. I help him to read and he'll come over to my house and lift weights with me and I also have put him on a diet. I have helped him read better and he's helped me in many weighs (sic).--Todd. [This young man, incidentally, is an athlete who plays baseball on a team that travels around the United States. The team is sponsored by Ray Combs, a native of Hamilton and the host of the television show Family Feud.]

I am a very lucky person to be a part of Teens for Literacy. My experience has been both challenging and enjoyable. I must admit I was very overwhelmed by how a child just a year younger than myself can't read any better than my seven year old sister. These past weeks I have noticed small changes, but like the boy I tutor, I get frustrated too. However, I never put him down or let him know that I am frustrated. So I think that even if he is able to sound out one word, or read one story, I know we have both succeeded.--Deanna.

My Teens for Literacy group has gone to Miami University several times this year to meet with other groups and discuss what we do in Teens for Literacy. We also learn about Miami. Once when we went we toured a library and another time we went to the Campus Avenue Building to have students from the Office of Learning Assistants (sic) talk to us about tutoring. A few weeks ago I wrote an article about the 1,000 Minute Club

for a newsletter. The 1,000 Minute Club encourages students to read by offering them rewards such as a free book and a field trip to a play for reading 1,000 minutes. I have been very busy this year in Teens for Literacy and I have enjoyed being active and helping people.--Donna.

As the last student mentions, the teams of teens come from time to time to Miami University. The purpose of their visits to encourage them to consider coming to college (preferably Miami) and to consider teaching as a profession. In turn I spend a good deal of time in the six schools which are located in Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Middletown, Ohio.

If you start a Teens for Literacy team in your school, whether in the inner-city or outer-city, you can do it without money; however, we spend approximately $1,500 for each school: $500 honorarium for the teacher overseeing the project, $500 for materials and other needs of the team, and $5/month for each team member. The remaining approximate $300 might be used for informal gatherings to keep the program on track and an end-of-year luncheon or party with selected guests including parents, teachers, administrators, and other students to celebrate the team-achievements of their school's Teens for Literacy. The relatively small sum, incidentally, can come from many sources including business partners and nearby universities.

We began Teens for Literacy four years ago with three schools; we now have eight teams in six schools. My intent is to add a school a year. I also plan to reach out to parents and guardians and to follow our Teens for Literacy graduates as they progress through schools. There are many ways to reach parents. One way is through informal breakfasts with the school

principal in the school. Another way is through evening meetings in a neutral location. Over coffee and donuts parents can share many ideas which can be jotted down on papers taped to the walls. Parents in a group that I sat in on came up with many ideas including 1) put breakfast dates on school calendar and in school handbook; 2) have one early mailing with all the breakfast dates for the school year; 3) have reminders brought home by the children the rest of the year; 4) have a phone network; and 5) use guilt. They also came up with many ideas to focus on during each of the meetings: helping parents who want to help their children with their homework, helping parents who want to know how to tutor, adopting a teacher, etc.

Reaching out to parents and following students as they progress will not be easy. For if there is one constant in inner- and now outer-city schools, and perhaps much of life, it's change, which at times is uplifting and sometimes otherwise. Since we began Teens for Literacy, only about half the teachers and principals are in the same schools. The change can be drastic: one of our inner-city schools was converted this summer into the Offices of the Cincinnati Board of Education. So following students, most of whom have moved on, will not be easy. But as my father used to say, nothing good comes easily. And since this may not be easy, I'm trusting that it'll be good.

In short, there are many ways to improve literacies in inner- and outer-cities. Keeping language simple, challenging students, involving them in their education, including parents, customizing teaching to our cultural mosaic, using common and uncommon sense, clarifying the role of principals are seven ways to improve literacies that cost little and add much to the value of education. In the 19th century Henri Stendhal wrote

one of the world's great novels, *The Red and the Black*. The story takes place in a time when there were only two ways to escape from poverty: through the red, the uniform of the military, or through the black, the uniform of the clergy. In this century the way out of poverty is through education. With leadership, will power and good will, we can influence the conditions under which all children no matter where they live can learn best.

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